



Utah State
Board of
Education

Special
Education
Services

WHO IS A STUDENT WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITY

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WHO IS A STUDENT WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITY?

The term, the most significant cognitive disability, does not denote a specific Individuals with Disabilities Education Acts (IDEA) disability category or categories but rather describes a set of educational factors that are determined by each student's unique needs through the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. The most significant cognitive disability is not determined by only a specific cognitive assessment score, but by a comprehensive understanding of the whole student, which indicates the disability significantly impacts intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior (typically functioning at least two and a half or more standard deviations below the mean).

The most significant cognitive disabilities refer to a small number of students who are within one or more existing categories of disability under the IDEA (e.g., autism, multiple disabilities, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and intellectual disability (ID)). However, students classified with a specific learning disability (SLD) or emotional-behavioral disability under Utah Special Education Rules (Utah SpEd Rules) are not considered to have the most significant cognitive disability because these classifications specify that the student's learning difficulties cannot be attributed to, or the result of, intellectual factors.

IEP Team Considerations/Descriptions/Examples of Evidence

There are several factors the IEP team must consider when determining whether a student has the most significant cognitive disability. All considerations should be based on evidence derived from cognitive, adaptive, academic, formal, and informal assessments, present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), IEP goals, work samples, and data from scientific research-based interventions.

The Utah State Board of Education (USBE) defines a student with the most significant cognitive disability (SWMSCD) as a student who:

- Requires intensive, repeated, modified, and direct individualized instruction and requires substantial supports to learn, maintain, and generalize skills in the student's grade and age-appropriate curriculum
- Has special education eligibility documentation indicating the disability significantly impacts intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior (typically

functioning at least two and a half or more standard deviations below the mean)

- Adaptive behavior skills are the practical, everyday abilities needed to function independently and meet the demands of daily life
- Cognitive and adaptive behavior evaluations are documented in the student's current eligibility determination form
- Demonstrates cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior in home, school, and community environments, which are significantly below age expectations, even with program modifications, adaptations, and accommodations
- Has a severe and complex cognitive disability, which limits the student from meaningful participation in the standard academic core curriculum or achievement of the academic content standards established at grade level, without substantial support, modifications, adaptations, and accommodations
 - The student requires instructional support through the alternate achievement standards, the Essential Elements (EE) to show progress and measurable gains in their grade-level curriculum
- Has a course of study that addresses the significant impact in adaptive behavior skills
- May be eligible to participate in alternate assessments; and
- Has a disability, which increases the need for dependence on others for many, if not all, daily living needs, and is expected to require extensive ongoing support through adulthood

[34 C.F.R. §200.6\(d\)](#); Utah Admin. Code [R277-705-2\(15\)](#)